DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 945 EA 007 138

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TITLE Religion in the Public School Curriculum.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 75
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of School Administrators (107th, Dallas, Texas, February 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Enrichment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethical Instruction; *Religion; *State Church Separation
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Religion

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of academic instruction in religion in the public schools is to inform children about religion rather than to indoctrinate them. When the study of religion is presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, there are no legal barriers. Now that the Supreme Court has settled the debate about what can and cannot be done, the major question facing the schools is whether they desire to design and implement religion in their curriculum. If it is determined that religion is to be included, it may be approached through special courses, units within courses, or enrichment activities. (Author/IRT)

ED106945

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
107th Annual Convention
Dallas, Texas February 21-24, 1975

SPEAKER: Dr. J. B. Morris, Superintendent, Nederland Independent School District. Nederland, Texas

TOPIC: RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

PLACE: Room N-214-16, Convention Center

TIME: Sunday, February 23, 11:30 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

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Throughout the history of the American school system, the instruction of religion has had a degree of influence on the school curriculum. The influence of religion on the school curriculum goes deep into the past just as the roots of a tree go deep into the earth. During recent years, there has been a growing concern among the American public as to the place of religion in the public schools.

The interest in religion in the schools and communities shifted in the 1950's to meet the demands of the public. During this period there were various reports on how to meet these demands of instruction in the moral and spiritual values. The Educational Policies Commission, a N.E.A./A.A.S.A. Commission, studied the problem and submitted the 1951 report "Morals and Values in the Public Schools." This report encouraged the public schools to teach moral and spiritual values. It suggested that the public classroom teachers, in teaching the moral and spiritual values, should not violate freedom of religion or the policy of separation of church and state. This new concept of teaching about the aims of moral and spiritual values was enthusiastically received by the educators and the public.

Whether they will admit it or not, the public schools are doing something in religion. In recent years there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of religion in the public school curriculum. This has been especially true following the 1963, United States Supreme Court decree and the 1964, A.A.S.A. report on Religion in the Public Schools which encouraged the academic study of religion in the public schools.

The primary purpose of academic instruction in religion in the public schools is to inform children about religion rather than to indoctrinate them. There are no legal barriers pertaining to the study of religion when presented objectively in an academic study as part of a secular program of education; there is only legislation restricting certain practices of religion in the public schools. The Court has settled the debate about what can and cannot be done; the major question facing the schools is whether they desire to design and implement religion in their curriculums.

How may academic religion be fused into the school curriculum without violating the rights of individuals? The function of the school is to educate about all religions, not to convert to any one religion. The schools' approach to academic religion must be one of instruction, not indoctrination.

The United States Supreme Court (Abington vs. Schempp, 1963) has indicated, "It certainly may be said the Bible is worthy of study for literary and historic qualities."

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Justice Tom Clark, who wrote the majority opinion, actually urged such studies, thus creating a new discipline. It appeared to Clark that "one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization." The courts have given public schools the invitation to teach the Boble or eligion in a factual, objective, and academic way.

This invitation was specifically pointed out when the Court indicated "that the establishment clause does not forbid teaching about religion or a study of the Bible in public schools." This special invitation to the school was also revealed in Epperson vs. Arkansas (1968), which allowed the schools to teach the theory of evolution as well as other theories, such as academic religion.

Even Madalyn Murray O'Hair, founder of the American Atheist Church, believes that religious theories should be taught in the public schools starting at the fifth grade. She believes that history of religion, a literature of religion, comparative religion, psycopathology of religion, and religious personalities should be taught.

When a child asks, "What is America?" any teacher can direct him to study the United States Constitution as it is written and as it has been interpreted and lived. If a pupil asks, "What is religion?" while in school, would the answer to the question dare be given in somewhat the same fashion? Yes. The schools have a responsibility to teach religion. But there is a difference between true religion" and "academic religion." Academic religion, while not the whole of religion, is that part in which the schools may participate.

Religion may be defined in various ways. One definition calls it the relationship of mankind to the supernatural being called God. By another definition religion is the loyalty of man to his ultimate moral values, to the convictions that control his conduct. The Supreme Court of the United States has accepted the latter definition in cases dealing with tax exemptions, entitlement to public office, and conscientious objectors to compulsory military service.

It is generally acknowledged that everything a man does or thinks presupposes certain values. When a man acts, he is merely betraying his innermost convictions as to what is ultimately of importance to him. Granted that this is so, must the teacher keep all his opinions to himself? Indeed, he cannot do so even if he wanted to. Teaching exposes one's value system, and whether or not the teacher is a strong individual, that value system will bear fruit (for better or for worse) in the lives of his students.

The teacher in a public school must be as objective as possible. Objectivity means not only not taking any particular side or merely expressing one's own opinion, but rather exploring all sides of an issue. Objectivity means taking a middle ground in the sense that one is able to point out unjust criticism on either side. The emphasis should be on objectivity of instruction and elimination of all cultic practices. The teacher may expose his pupils to but not impose instruction in religion on them. The children may study what is practices--but they may not practice what is studied. This means that a pupil can study about the various religions, but to practice his own religion he must go to his own place of worship.

Religion is not to be "bootlegged" into the school under the guise of studying about academic religion in the classroom. The teacher must demonstrate certain qualifications. The most important of these is the ability to understand his own assumptions and to refrain from insisting that ail his pupils accept them. The teacher must maintain an atmosphere free from oppression and from negative overtones concerning

anyone's belief. A teacher should never permit himself to be drawn into a debate on a doctrinal point with an individual student.

There may be a general assumption that methods of instruction, whatever they may be, are only as good as the teachers using them. Crucial to any teacher's success is his training, experience, familiarity with the material that he is going to teach, and above all, his understanding of and empathy with children.

Since religion is of vital interest to many people, those who study it may encounter misunderstanding from time to time. The teacher should realize that he may be misunderstood by the pupil and misquoted to the parent who, in turn, may react negatively on the basis of hearsay evidence. However, the teacher must be encouraged to give the study about academic religion a proper consideration in the presentation of his lessons. The teacher's main emphasis should be factual instruction and objectivity in instruction in academic religion.

There are some negative factors that should be avoided in the curriculum; for example, defining one religion in terms of another, or treating the religions of the world as if they were churches in the Christian sense. The curriculum should not in any way indicate that members of any religion are any more or less sincere than the members of any other.

The following topics are specific ways of bringing academic religion into a secular curriculum.[4]

1. To expose children to an understanding of how religion and civilization advanced.

2. To expose children to the Bible as a literary classic.

3. To expose pupils to our national symbol, the flag, and to the constitution that includes religious dimensions.

4. To expose pupils to Bible stories or information about Bible lands in literature, geography, and history.

5. To expose children to the legends in religion.

6. To expose pupils to various religious movements in our present and past cultures.

7. To expose children to comparative religions and religious history in various countries and societies.

8. To expose children to the Bible and to religious institutions in order to develop them for life in a society where people of various faiths must learn to live together.

9. To expose children to the Bible and to various religions so that they may determine their own personal philosophies, values, and relationships to the various institutions of life.

Any educator may approach the study of religion in one of three ways: special courses, units within courses, and enrichment. The following methods are to be used as a "springboard" approach for the instruction of academic religion.

Special Courses

Biblical Literature. A survey of the Old and New Testaments emphasizing literary types and content. There is a great deal of difference between studying the Bible and reading it for devotional purposes.

Biblical History. Survey of the historical literature of the Old and New Testaments emphasizing the place of Israel, Jesus, and the early church in world history.

History of Religions. A study tracing the origin, development, and present influence of one or more of the representative religions.

Comparative Religions. A study comparing the major beliefs and values of two or more religions.

Ethics. A study of various value systems and their relationship to conduct.

Units Within Courses

Literature. Study selected Biblical literature. Character studies of religious personalities.

Study specific books as representative literature. (Esther - short story. Psalms - poetry).

History. Study the religious motivation of major historical events. (Crusades, Reformation, founding of America).

Study the influences of religion on personalities and on government documents.

Study the Biblical roots of American ideals (liberty, value of individual, private ownership).

Correlate events of secular and Biblical history.

Speech. Study speeches of Biblical personalities. Study Biblical allusions in contemporary speeches.

Art. Study select Biblical passages as they have affected painting (medieval art).

Study the religious commitments that have influenced the work of particular artists.

Music. Study representative religious compositions.

Study the influence of select Biblical passages upon great music.

Using the Bible as a resource book and referring to religion (religious personalities, movements, literature, and themes) when germane to the subject will enrich the curriculum with the religious dimension.

Supplementary Reading. Biographies of religious leaders and modern missionary adventures are excellent subjects for book reports. The religious influence on various aspects of our history and literature makes excellent theme topics.

Records. Available records include children's Bible stories, professional readings of famous Biblical passages, Biblical plays, and religiously oriented music from spirituals to classics.

Displays. Models usable for displays and exhibits include Michelangelo's David, Solomon's temple, and the Gutenberg press, which produced the first printed book (the Bible).

Stamps. Hobby day will bring out countless stamps with religious and Biblical significance from virtually every nation in the world, including the United States.

Show and Tell. A popular item on the "Show and Tell" table in the lower grades is the modern stereoscopic viewer. Among the many discs available are several about the Holy Land and the Biblical narratives.

Short Stories. In writing short stories the child may use the Bible rather than try to invent a new plot for a story or play. The pupils may change the setting and develop a new story.

What are some of the major reasons why the public schools do not provide instruction in academic religion or the study about religion? Too many people in our society have cursed the darkness rather than light a candle and discover the truth. There have been many people, including educators, who believe that the courts have kicked religion out of the front door of the schools and let communism in the back door. This is contrary to the facts. In 1962 and 1963 the United States Supreme Court actually urged "teaching about religion or a study of the Bible in public schools."

Since many school trustees do not feel the need for any board policies or regulations pertaining to religion in the curriculum, this may indicate an indifferent and apathetic attitude toward this vital subject. The American Association of School Administrators Commission on Religion in the Public Schools recommended that all school boards establish a "desirable policy in the school . . . to deal directly and objectively with religion whenever and wherever it is intrinsic to learning experience in various fields of study and to seek out appropriate ways to teach what has been called 'the reciprocal culture.'" This study also reveals that "a curriculum that ignored religion would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men's lives as health or politics or economics. By omission it would appear to deny that religion has been and is important in man's history - a denial of the obvious."

Generally school administrators in the United States may be reluctant to initiate or support the study of religion in the school curriculum. Administrators may be too timid to present this subject (academic religion) to their school boards because of the nature of the subject. Each administrator must know how his community feels about this subject. Any administrator cannot be too far ahead of the people's wishes or too far behind, since his job may be at stake. If the school trustees and administrators do not support the study of religion, it may have an influence on the teachers. The teachers may be hesitant about becoming involved in the topic of religion without this administrative support.

Before there can be any changes in a curriculum, the role of the teacher must be taken into consideration. The teacher's role and responsibility may be one of the vital elements in teaching about religion.

One of the last major reasons for not providing for the study about religion is a crowded curriculum. In Religion in the Public Schools the American Association of School Administrators revealed that "a curriculum which ignored religion would itself have serious implications." There are many courses in the curriculum already competing for the child's time. Some educators would say we have our hands full with the "3 B's" - beans, busing, and ball games.

Any administrator may approach the study of religion in one of these three ways: (1) avoid the subject entirely, (2) try to circumvent the Court's rulings by involving the cultic practice in the curriculum, and (3) be knowledgeable about what can and cannot be done with the study about religion. Many teachers and administrators may not be aware of the recent movements in this vital subject, yet Justice Brennan in a 1963 Supreme Court ruling stated "to what extent at what points in the curriculum religious materials should be cited, are matters which the Courts ought to entrust very largely to the experienced officials who superintend our Nation's public schools. They are experts in such matters and we are not." Public school administrators have no excuse for not bringing academic religion into the curriculum. Which way will they move?

1 Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U. S. 225 (1963).

2 Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U. S. 97 (1968).

3 Firing Line, produced and directed by Wattern Steibel, transcript of program recorded at WYES-TV, New Orleans, PBS on June 9, 1971 (Columbia, S. C.: Southern Education Communications Association, (1971), p. 6.

4 J. B. Morris, "The Instructional Status of Academic Religion in Large City Public High Schools in the United States" (unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, Baylor University, 1970).